

Creating, Experiencing, Sense-Making: Art Worlds in Schools

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# Creating, Experiencing, Sense-Making: Art Worlds in Schools

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MAXINE GREENE

Even with a consciousness of the seriousness of arts curricula in these days, and the complexities in the discussion of them, one cannot but feel some sense of carnival, some sense of openings when people come together to explore their experiences in the arts. And, indeed, they cannot *but* tap their own experiences; none of us can. Our arguments for the arts' centrality in schools, for raising the school windows to the art worlds outside, are grounded in our own encounters, many of which have permanently changed our lives.

Because I am an unreconstructed New Yorker and because these worlds were originally articulated in my city, I am moved to begin with a rendering of the New York experience that sheds a kind of light on what I said above. The beginning of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* comes back to me, those sentences about the "insular city of the Manhattoes, belted round by wharves as Indian isles by coral reefs." He went on to say that "commerce surrounds it with its surf." And then:

Right and left the streets take you waterward. Its  
extreme down-town is the battery, where that  
noble mole is washed by waves and cooled by breezes,  
which a few hours previous were out of sight of land.  
Look at the crowd of water-gazers there.<sup>1</sup>

He was not only describing or depicting the city where he once had lived.

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He was bringing into being a transfigured city, a created world, offering to readers his vision of people "of week-days pent up in lath and plaster—tied to counters, nailed to benches, clinched to desks"—reaching outward towards the sea, towards another space, an alternative reality. You know what a work of art can do when it comes to making us reach out that way, break free of the counters, benches, desks of the ordinary.

Those Melville was rendering—many of those we teach—seek possibilities of expansion and significance no one can ever entirely predefine. The several arts in their multiplicity and mystery hold such potentials; but they can be realized only if we find ways of tapping the range of human capacities too often left dormant when persons are conceived mainly as human resources for the building of a technological society, or if they are thought of as passive spectators, members of an audience or crowd. "With the arts," wrote Denis Donoghue, "people can make a space for themselves, and fill it with intimations of freedom and presence."<sup>2</sup> Martin Heidegger, earlier, wrote that the arts "make space for spaciousness";<sup>3</sup> they often open worlds. Openings, beginnings, initiatives, new understandings, more intense engagements: these, I think, are our shared concerns.

Who does not welcome the attention now being given to the arts in education and nourish the hope they will never again be treated as frivolous, decorative, purely of "right-brain" significance? At once, even as I say that, I am sharply aware that our discussions are taking place within a context of technicism, of product and achievement orientation, of proposals that often treat education as a means to the end of achieving economic competitiveness and military supremacy in the world. Yes, the arts are flourishing, according to all appearances. People line up for the cultural events that are the great museum exhibitions: the Van Gogh show, the Miro show, the Matisse show, Cindy Sherman's photographs, Richard Serra's sculptures, Henry Moore's. Regional theaters proliferate; students study Bournonville ballet in the middle west as well as in New York: balletomanes are multiplying, as are aficionados of extremely "modern" dance; there are large audiences for musical performances, especially if Isaac Stern or Itzak Perlman or Rampal or Bernstein or Previn is playing. There is a huge diffusion of the arts, as television introduces larger and larger audiences to serious drama, opera, dance, the great symphonies.

None of this testifies to a high level of aesthetic sophistication or even to a high level of enjoyment. The temper of the time is consumerist, passive, uncritical, careless, often uncaring. The schools are accused of insufficiency when it comes to the fundamental literacies. Publics are convinced, somehow, that, "since research has told us what works," we are in need of applying the tools of technical rationality to teaching. If we do, it is assumed, the young will be effectively prepared for success in the advanced technological society to come. There is talk of critical thinking, much

talk of “cultural literacy.” But there is boredom; there are addictions all around; there are drop-outs; there are the doubts and fears evoked by the Chernobyl and the Challenger disasters. And at once, without surcease, there are the voices of the evangelists and the audiences saying “yes” to Jesus and the promise of Armageddon. There are the other voices presenting cost-benefit formulations, lulling with unreadable calculations. There are silences in the spheres that ought to be public spheres where people can come together in speech and action, out in the open, to identify common concerns. I do not need to go on about homeless people, hungry children, broken families, and the erosion of support systems. It is only that I find it hard to consider rationales for art education and aesthetic education without having a context in mind or without naming the context as I see it. If we do not think about it now and then, if we confine ourselves to talk of “cultural formation,” we are likely to forget our distinctiveness as people committed to the arts. Denis Donoghue, whom I quoted earlier, wrote that “the arts are on the margin, and it doesn’t bother me to say they are marginal. . . . I want to say that the margin is the place for those feelings and intuitions which daily life doesn’t have a place for, and mostly seems to suppress.”<sup>4</sup>

Even as we work to incorporate and incarnate the arts in curricula, I believe we ought to cherish that special marginality. Certain current proposals respecting art programs (certain so-called “action plans”) extend the definition of the arts so much that schoolpeople are never challenged to confront the peculiar role of the artistic-aesthetic in human lives. Other programs, emphasizing the “basic” character of art education, are prone to justify it by summoning up the pragmatic or utilitarian arguments of the education reports. The arts, they suggest, can contribute to the intellectual power required by this country, or to the productivity being demanded, or to the cultural literacy that is supposed to bind us together, or to the disciplinary emphases that are to enhance academic rigor and overcome shiftlessness, relativism, “soft” electives, and the rest. I shall not even mention those that stress the vocational relevance of the arts first of all.

Too many questions are tamped down; the more we gain a spurious security, the more we respond to outside demands. I am reminded of a question posed by the poet Holderlin in an elegy, a question to which Heidegger referred in his discussions of the arts: “And what are poets for in a destitute time?”<sup>5</sup> I think we should ask: “And what are artists for? What are the arts for? What are art and aesthetic education for?” You might not want to call this a destitute time, but you might agree to call it a troubled time, for all the appearances of well-being, for all America feeling good about itself, for all the resurgent patriotism, and for all the light before the golden door. Nonetheless, it is important to live in it fully, to

be *interested* in our projects and our lived worlds. Young people have to be interested in this fashion if they are to pose questions with respect to their lives, renew their worlds as the days go on, try to keep them alive in time. For this to happen, they have to be enabled to break with confinement in the domains of popular culture, mass entertainment, televised realities, and private cynicism or hopelessness. Offered concrete and significant alternatives, windows through which to see beyond the actual, they may refuse their own submergence in the typical and the everyday. They may raise challenges to the taken-for-granted and begin to look at things as if they could be otherwise. In my view, this is the ground for learning to learn. I am convinced that it is not only the thought of *having* more that moves the young to reach beyond themselves; it is the idea of *being* more, becoming different, experiencing more deeply, overcoming the humdrum, the plain ordinariness and repetitions of everyday life.

Artists are for disclosing the extraordinary in the ordinary. They are for transfiguring the commonplace, as they embody their perceptions and feelings and understandings in a range of languages, in formed substance of many kinds. They are for affirming the work of imagination—the cognitive capacity that summons up the “as if,” the possible, the what is not and yet might be. They are for doing all this in such a way as to enable those who open themselves to what they create to see more, to hear more, to feel more, to attend to more facets of the experienced world.

I think of Joseph Conrad saying (in the Preface to *The ‘Nigger’ of the Narcissus*) that the artist

appeals to that part of our being which is not dependent on wisdom; to that in us which is a gift and not an acquisition . . . to our capacity for delight and wonder, to the sense of mystery surrounding our lives; to our sense of pity, and beauty, and pain; to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation—and to the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts.<sup>6</sup>

Is it not at least conceivable that such an appeal may make palpable and visible such parts of being in the young? That it may bring to the surface what many of them have never suspected, much less known? Conrad went on:

My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel, to make you see. That—and no more, and it is everything. If I succeed, you shall find there according to your deserts: encouragement, consolation, fear, charm—all you demand—and, perhaps, also that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask.<sup>7</sup>

I think it is possible to say as well “by the power of paint, by the power of musical sound, by the power of the body in movement”; but I also

think we need to acknowledge that the task (Conrad's task, Cézanne's task, Mozart's, Balanchine's) cannot be achieved if persons have not been empowered to be personally present to their works—if they cannot notice what is there to be noticed, if their awareness is not informed.

I am concerned about what can be done to make such discriminating presentness more likely in the lives of the young. When I ponder it, I cannot disentangle my preoccupations with it from my other overriding concerns for critical reflectiveness, moral sensitivity, craft, care, and even the struggle against nuclearism. I am afraid of somnolence, you see, and carelessness, and impassivity, and lack of concern. Sometimes, thinking back to Albert Camus's great novel, I associate all that with what he called the "plague,"<sup>8</sup> a metaphor for indifference, abstractness, and for the incapacity to "take the side of the victim in times of pestilence." Lately, I have been associating it with what the Czech novelist, Milan Kundera, calls "kitsch,"<sup>9</sup> meaning anything that stops people from thinking, from confronting their lives. I believe that education, among other things, should be a means of arousing persons to wide-awakeness, to courageous and (I would add) resistant life.

To open people to the arts and what they may (or may not) make possible for them is to make a deliberate effort to combat blankness and passivity and stock responses and conformity. And, yes, the empty verbalizations and chit-chat that build folding screens against reality. I realize there are no guarantees, that there is an "unregenerate Adam" in each of us, that release and arousal do not always lead to humane action or convictions of solidarity. But it is crucial for me to hold in mind the fact that works of art, when faithfully perceived, when attentively read, address themselves to persons in their freedom. And persons, as has been pointed out, are centers of choice and valuation. They are capable of intention and agency; they can take initiatives and embark on new beginnings in what they perceive as an open world. I cannot conceive of a teacher committed to educating rather than training who does not posit his/her students as persons who can be provoked to choose to learn, to choose to become, with all the risks that that entails. And of course there are risks: we cannot determine where free persons, acting on their freedom, will go. This seems to be especially relevant to art education and aesthetic education; since, obviously, choosing is involved if a person moves into an aesthetic encounter of any kind. I cannot conceive of *imposing* an aesthetic experience on a student, of manipulating him/her into having one, anymore than I can conceive of having an aesthetic experience in a state of bland, uninformed receptivity.

Like Louis Arnaud Reid, Mikel Dufrenne, and John Dewey as well, I cannot separate the subject from the object when I ponder aesthetic encounters. I find it impossible to imagine aesthetic qualities—the textures of

sound, the shimmer of light, the heavy sadness of spoken words—without someone experiencing them, attending to them for what they are. Nor can I imagine an aesthetic experience being wholly subjective, happening apart from the live presence of an aesthetic object or event, in some private interior space. Reid wrote:

On the one hand, there is the physical picture with its physical surface which we attend to. We attend to it, and in the way which is called aesthetic, and the aesthetic quality of the picture would not exist except in relation to the body-and-mind of someone perceiving it. . . . The physical picture is the physical basis without which there would not be this particular aesthetic experience. It is through the appearing-of-the-physical-object-to-a-spectator-looking-at-it-in-a-certain-way that the aesthetic quality comes into being.<sup>10</sup>

Perceived in a certain way, distanced in a certain way from the commonplace and the habitual, the physical work is, as it were, transmuted into an aesthetic object by and for an attending consciousness. A living human being must choose himself/herself in relation to it, allow his/her energies to move out to the work, to achieve it in his/her experience, to order its particularities and gradually realize it as a whole. What is important is the event, the situation out of which the aesthetic object emerges. It is not *there*, hanging on the wall; it is not *here*, in the attending mind. The situation is created by the transaction, by the grasping of a consciousness—drawn to a Cézanne painting, say, by a stir, a quiver of feelings, held rapt for a time as it intuits its presence—vaguely, at first, as landscape—as line, color, shape. There is tacit awareness at work, and then a gradual focusing on images like mountain, tree, overarching sky. The more the beholder knows about picturing, about paint and canvas, the more he/she sees, the more details, the more appearances emerge. Apprehending it as a depiction rather than a representation of an actual mountain, noticing what there is to be noticed, the beholder may be able to see *into* the images revealed, see meanings condensed in symbolic forms. Taking time, he/she may single out the strokes of violet paint that model and give shape and contour to the transfigured mountain, watch the form of it jut forth against the pictorial plane, grasp the shifting perspectives that make its many profiles somehow visible, feel the touch of the textured sky, the play of light. When this occurs, it may be possible for the beholder to take his/her own journey though a world that discloses what he/she may never have suspected, much less seen. The poet Rilke, wondering at a Cézanne painting, spoke of the conflict between Cézanne's continual *looking* and his effort to appropriate and make personal use of what he received *through* looking—a discord in some way visible in his painting, one that may affect not only an individual's way of attending but his/her way of grasping the phenomenal world. The more becomes visible, the wider becomes the ground over which imagination can play, shaping, ordering the particularities into

a never completed whole. This may become an occasion for the ordinary, the taken-for-granted to show its hidden abundance—for imagination to move to the unexpected, for the individual to discover that there is always more in experience and more to experience than can ever be predicted. To realize that is to be acutely conscious of possibility, of windows opening in experience—to understand that there is always more for personal use, for appropriation by the live consciousness of a person fully present to the world.

I might say similar things about encounters with other art forms, different though the languages are, and even though (as Nelson Goodman says) they are untranslatable into one another.<sup>11</sup> The point I want to make has to do with the disclosures that become possible when we focus upon actual encounters. I grant the importance of “instruction in the concepts and processes intrinsic to the subject of art,” but primarily as such instruction informs and provokes the perceiving and imagining that bring works of art alive.

There is no question but that engagement with the medium concerned has a focal role to play. In many senses, the effort to learn the languages of music and dance and the visual arts is self-justifying. And it is unarguably valuable for persons to discover the multiple ways there are of expressing and articulating what is felt and perceived and even known, to summon up stored images, to find new images that carry meaning. Obviously, this involves more than free-floating creativity. Knowledge of many sorts is involved. I think of Vincent Van Gogh writing to Theo about the laws of proportion, of light and shadow, of perspective “which one must know in order to be able to draw well; without that knowledge, it always remains a fruitless struggle and one never brings forth anything.” And I think about him saying, “The question was—and I found it very difficult—how to get the depth of color, the enormous force and solidness of that ground. And while painting it I perceived for the first time how much light there was in that darkness, how was one to keep that light and at the same time retain the glow and depth of that rich color?” I am struck by the significance of his saying that “while painting it I perceived it for the first time”;<sup>12</sup> because it suggests to me how the very act of painting and the struggle with the vehicles at hand themselves open up features of the surrounding world, certainly something we all want to do—as we want to provide opportunities for children to explore the language of imagery, to seek their own symbols, to use intelligences too often ignored.

At the Lincoln Center Institute for the Arts in Education, where I have worked and tried to do philosophy for a decade, and in its related institutes around the country, we strive for an interplay between explorations of the media of the various art forms—the body in motion; spoken and written language; sound; paint, clay, paper—and apprehension of actual



performances, exhibitions, texts. At the institutes, professional artists work initially with classroom teachers on all levels to initiate them into the disciplines, the languages, the modes of artistry, the craft that identify their particular art forms. The presumption is that teachers involved that way in learning to learn—with a clear sense of norm, of standard, of how an art form *ought* to be pursued—are not only prepared to work productively with artists when they come to their schools; they are in a better position to communicate to their students, at appropriate levels, some awareness of concepts and processes, many learned from practicing artists, many discovered in the heightened awareness they themselves have gained with regard to dance, theater, music, visual forms, even literature. Numbers of them have discovered what they never suspected about the play of energy in space and time, the shaping of sound, the patterning of stage movement, the forms of dialogue, the colors of voices, the interplay of lights and color—the stuff, the many-faceted stuff out of which works of art are made. To move with a professional dancer or choreographer and, in doing so, to be introduced to the language of dance is to be provided a means of exploring the raw materials with which Petipa and Balanchine and Graham began, and at once of exploring one's own body and others' bodies in motion. It may be to discover what is entailed by exerting energy in a given space and period of time, by making patterns with gesture and movement, by creating visual metaphors with fingers, hands, shoulders, legs. And this enables people to notice more, as it enables them to apprehend dance on stage with tacit and bodily awareness that cannot but feed into the consciousness of attending and bring content to the words used for describing dance. If consciousness is indeed embodied consciousness, if a person present to a work of art is present as both body and mind, it becomes particularly important to introduce people to what it feels like to apprehend with newly discovered bodily capacities and with minds empowered to pay heed to designs, diagonals, shifts and shimmers and turns.

Whether teachers are improvising with a drama teacher after a performance of *The Glass Menagerie*, say, or *Death of a Salesman*, setting scenes, writing dialogue, becoming acquainted with the choices that have to be made as the script is interpreted and reinterpreted, relating speech to gesture, finding out how an illusioned world can be brought into persuasive being on a stage—whether they are inventing themes and melodies for percussive instruments and inscribing what they hear on musical staffs, the better to think by means of music the next time they listen to a Bach fugue or a Beethoven quartet, the more they are discovering about the works being performed—and about themselves attending to those works.

Of course various critical approaches can help in the process of uncovering, most particularly if criticism is used to provide perspectives on what is being experienced, to elucidate, to point out, to disclose. And, yes, it helps

if teachers—and, in time, their students—can take several points of view towards a given work of art—attending to it as artefact, perhaps, in the cultural history of drama or music, viewing it in terms of style, seeing it as expressive or mimetic or in terms of their own responses, seeing it as a significant form, complete unto itself. Each mode of criticism provides a grid; each selects out certain dimensions for attention; no one exhausts the meanings of a work or identifies all its possibilities. Think of the multiple ways in which the “new expressionism” can be read—of the differing ways in which the Klimt and Shiele paintings at the Vienna 1900 show can appear, depending on the critical point of view. Consider the exhibit of primitive art some years ago and what the discovery of “affinities” made visible—or the ways in which we have learned to encounter the African pieces or the doorposts, masks, and relics from the Pacific islands in the Michael Rockefeller wing at the Metropolitan Museum.

I think in terms of expansion, of new connections in experience, of a sedimenting or a layering of meanings, a thickening, if you like, a growing density of texture as persons allow their past experiences to feed into their present ones, as more and more is known. I think of Dewey, saying in *Art as Experience* that experience becomes conscious only when meanings derived from earlier experiences enter it. “Imagination,” he wrote, “is the only gateway through which these meanings can find their way into a present interaction.”<sup>13</sup> He meant that present experience only becomes fully conscious when what is given is extended by meanings drawn from what is absent, what can be summoned up imaginatively. Reading *Moby Dick* again, quoting from it as I did, I am somehow aware that I am grasping the text this time with the help of meanings funded from past readings and past experiences as well. For example, my reading about a “damp, drizzly November” in Ishmael’s soul and his desire to move off, to save his own life, is informed by memories of some of my Novembers and my desires to confront my own White Whale. And I am conscious of the reason water-gazing means so much to me, why the image of water-gazers evokes multiple images (drawn from past experience) of persons in search, persons reaching out to possibility. There is always a gap, Dewey said, between the here and now of a present interaction and past experiences. “Because of this gap, all perception involves a risk; it is a venture into the unknown.” As my present reading of *Moby Dick* is assimilated to past readings and past experiences, it somehow makes me rewrite my own life story, makes me see what I have never seen, recognize what I have never noticed in the themes of my own life. If it did not defamiliarize in that fashion, if my present reading only confirmed what I have always known, the resulting experience would have been routine and mechanical. My imagination would not have gone to work; I would not be wondering, questioning, re-experiencing even now, reaching beyond where I am. Realizing how much

the novel (even the paragraph I read) have made me see, I can only deeply agree that a work of art operates imaginatively by concentrating and enlarging immediate experience, by expressing the meanings imaginatively evoked. Pondering this, I think again about making works of art accessible in such a fashion to diverse young persons of different ages and with different biographies—and about the ventures into the unknown we can encourage as we provoke them to learn to learn.

It strikes me that my own sequential mastery of aesthetic and literary concepts, my own acquaintance with American history and the history of the arts in America, my reading of the many criticisms of *Moby Dick*—for all that they have contributed to my store of knowledge—cannot account for the moments of heightened consciousness I lived through in rereading *Moby Dick* these past few days. I question, for that reason and others, the notion of a sequential curriculum when it comes to informed appreciation of art forms. A spiral, perhaps, in Jerome Bruner's sense, an emergent curriculum, perhaps, but not a curriculum modeled after those in the traditional disciplines, where the primary goal is to initiate the young into the distinctive symbol systems associated with the so-called "forms of life" and the criteria governing their public expression.

Of course we need to introduce students to the symbol systems associated with the various arts; but we want to do so (or so I believe) to enhance their capacity to see, to hear, to read, and to imagine—not simply to conceptualize, or to join the great "conversation" going on over time. For Nelson Goodman, whose work focuses on symbol systems and who regards the aesthetic experience as basically cognitive, the experience involves

making delicate discriminations and discerning subtle relationships, identifying symbol systems and characters within these systems and what these characters denote and exemplify, interpreting works and reorganizing the world in terms of works and works in terms of the world. Much of our experience and many of our skills are brought to bear and may be transformed by the encounter. The aesthetic "attitude" is restless, searching, testing—is less attitude than action: creation and recreation.<sup>14</sup>

Process, action, not mainly conceptualization; the consummation, the culmination is in experience rendered conscious and increasingly informed. Yes, art history has a part to play in informing it, if some knowledge of past context, past conventions, and cryptograms can help persons engage, say, with an El Greco and, later, with a Francis Bacon or an Edvard Munch. What is involved in encountering those straining, aspiring El Greco faces—and, then, Bacon's figures at the Crucifixion and Munch's *The Scream*? Heidegger has provided a cautionary word where this is concerned.

Well, then, the works themselves stand and hang in collections and exhibitions. But are they here in themselves as the work they them-

selves are, or are they rather here as objects of the art industry? Works are made available for public and private art appreciation. Official agencies assume the care and maintenance of works. Connoisseurs and critics busy themselves with them. Art dealers supply the market. Art-historical study makes the works the objects of science. Yet in all this busy activity, do we encounter the work itself?<sup>15</sup>

Teachers of the art of literature have had experiences, as you well know, with abandoning the work of art in the study of social contexts, biographies, literary history; and, indeed, it is and has been extraordinarily difficult to do an adequate historical study of any art form and, at once, take time for aesthetic encounters with particular ones. In the domain of literature, the reaction to the loss of the work of art is to be found in the movement called the New Criticism, where the literary work was conceived as an autonomous universe, sufficient unto itself, to be analyzed and examined and explored for purely aesthetic values, untrammelled by sociological or psychological or historical associations. In the past period, there has been a mounting critique of pure formalism in literary teaching and literacy criticism—and a rising interest in what is sometimes called “reader reception,” in interpretation, in teaching in such a fashion that readers will be empowered to *achieve* diverse works as meaningful within their own experience. Emphasizing the necessity for a book to be read and to engender responses in human beings for it to be meaningful, Wolfgang Iser speaks of the two poles—the artistic and aesthetic—of the literary work. The artistic pole is the text; the aesthetic is the realization accomplished by the reader.

In view of this polarity, it is clear that the work itself cannot be identical with the text or with the concretization, but must be situated somewhere between the two. It must inevitably be virtual in character, as it cannot be reduced to the reality of the text or to the subjectivity of the reader, and it is from this virtuality that it derives its dynamism. As the reader passes through the various perspectives offered by the text and relates the different views and patterns to one another he sets the work in motion, and so sets himself in motion, too.<sup>16</sup>

Not only does that draw our attention to the important fact that imaginative literature must be included among the arts as we think of arts curricula; it makes very much the same points as have been made above about the aesthetic encounter where other kinds of art forms are concerned. We are left with open questions with respect to arts curricula and whether, indeed, they can or should be discipline-based. I understand the need to counteract the view that instruction in many of the arts (although not literature) is nonacademic and nonsystematic; I understand the desire for “scope, sequence, and accountability.” I am not convinced, however, that “acquisition of art concepts and skills” will lead to the experiences of ex-

pansion I have described, or to the “creation and recreation” of which Goodman speaks, or to the kind of encounter that sets beholders or listeners or readers “in motion”—breaking with the fixed and the ordinary, transforming their lived worlds. I think there may be other ways.

I want to allow for water-gazing. I want to allow for the sound of a “blue guitar”—which, as in the Wallace Stevens poem, does not “play things as they are.” Yes, it is a metaphor for imagination, for the unpredictable, for possibility. The guitarist sings at the end: “You as you are? You are yourself. The blue guitar surprises you.”<sup>17</sup> I want to see a curriculum that allows for the risks of which Dewey spoke—and for surprise.

I have spoken my piece on the arts, if not on love, and settled nothing. I think of the end of Plato’s *Symposium* and that remarkable upward movement rendered by Socrates—towards what?—towards the essence of beauty, the essence of love, the stars. Not believing we will find the essence of an art curriculum today, I choose to conclude with another image of someone moving upward, against all prediction, breaking with ordinary sequences and certainly with calculations, but ending with a reassuring word. It is by Anne Sexton, and it is (appropriately) in a collection called *New York Poems*. It is entitled “Riding an Elevator into the Sky” and begins with a fireman’s warning not to book a room over the fifth floor in any New York hotel, and a comment taken from the *New York Times* saying that the elevator always seeks out the floor of the fire and automatically opens and won’t shut. And then:

Many times I’ve gone past  
the fifth floor,  
cranking toward,  
but only once  
have I gone all the way up.  
Sixtieth floor:  
small plants and swans bending  
into their grave.  
Floor two hundred:  
mountains with the patience of a cat,  
silence wearing its sneakers.

Floor five hundred:  
messages and letters centuries old,  
birds to drink,  
a kitchen of clouds.  
Floor six thousand:  
the stars,  
skeletons on fire,  
their arms singing.  
And a key,  
a very large key,  
that opens something—

some useful door—  
somewhere—  
up there.<sup>18</sup>

A key. A useful door. That is why we are here.

#### Notes

1. Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), p. 3.
2. Denis Donoghue, *The Arts without Mystery* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1985), p. 129.
3. Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 45.
4. Donoghue, *The Arts without Mystery*.
5. Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, p. 91.
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